

Famous New Yorker Geraldine Ferraro

Geraldine Ferraro didn't quite achieve everything she wanted to in life. She never became Vice-President of the United States, but she made history trying.

The daughter of Italian immigrants, Geraldine Ferraro was born in Newburgh on August 26, 1935. The family moved to a South Bronx apartment after Geraldine's father died. Her mother worked hard and made many sacrifices, so Geraldine wouldn't be stigmatized as poor while attending parochial school. Geraldine earned a scholarship to Marymount Manhattan College but worked multiple jobs to meet personal expenses. She had once wanted to become a doctor, but the typical occupation for a female college graduate in 1956 was teaching school. While teaching in Astoria, Queens, she attended night classes at Fordham Law School, earned her law degree in 1960 and was admitted to the bar in 1961.

Ferraro worked as a lawyer for her husband's real estate business and did pro bono work for poor clients in Family Court. In 1970 she was elected president of the Queens County Women's Bar Association. Socializing with lawyers drew her into politics. She first worked on her cousin Nicholas Ferraro's campaign for State Senate. When Nicholas became District Attorney for Queens County, he named her an assistant prosecutor. In 1977 she took over the county's Special Victims Bureau.

As a tough but compassionate crime fighter, Ferraro clearly had a future in politics. When her Congressman retired, friends urged her to represent New York's 9th District in the House of Representatives. Spurned at first by party leaders, Ferraro secured thousands of signatures to make the Democratic primary ballot. After winning the nomination and the general election, she was offered a spot on the powerful Ways and Means Committee but chose committee assignments that enabled her to benefit her district.

Reelected in 1980 and 1982, Ferraro rose within the Democratic party. She was deputy chairman of President Jimmy Carter's reelection campaign in 1980, secretary of the House Democratic Caucus in 1981 and chairman of the platform committee for the 1984 Democratic National Convention. Her success in a district that voted for Republican Ronald Reagan over Carter in 1980 convinced many Democrats that she could challenge Reagan nationwide. Starting in the summer of 1983, she was mentioned frequently as a possible Vice-Presidential candidate. At the 1984 convention Democratic, presidential nominee Walter Mondale chose Ferraro as his running mate. She was the first woman to run on the national ticket of one of the nation's major political parties.

Mondale and Ferraro opposed President Reagan and Vice-President George H.W. Bush. While Mondale hoped voters would make history by choosing Ferraro, Republicans questioned her experience in foreign policy and her financial ties to her husband's business. She and Mondale suffered a historic defeat, winning only Mondale's home state of Minnesota and the District of Columbia. Since she hadn't run for Congress again, her defeat left her without a job – but the campaign had made her a celebrity. She prospered by giving speeches, appearing in commercials and publishing a best-selling autobiography.

Geraldine Ferraro failed twice, in 1992 and 1998, to win a Democratic nomination for U.S. Senate. In 1993, President Bill Clinton appointed her ambassador to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights. Until her death on March 26, 2011, she remained a prominent Democratic spokesperson and served as an inspirational figure during a long struggle with cancer. She had won her place in history just by trying.



Image courtesy of the
University of Arkansas



Newburgh is a city on the west shore of the Hudson River in Orange County. It is located approximately 90 south of Albany and 60 miles north of New York City.

For more information about Geraldine Ferraro visit the library to read one of her autobiographies, "Ferraro: My Story" or "Changing History: Women, Power and Politics." This is one of a series of Famous New Yorker profiles written by Kevin Gilbert for the NYNPA-Newspaper In Education. All rights reserved 2013.